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The spectacle of crime, digitized

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation *and social anatomy*

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ABSTRACT One of the most significant features of the television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* is its central preoccupation – forensic evidence – and the profession practised by its major characters – forensic science. Scientific inscriptions consistently allow the crime scene investigators (CSIs) to determine 'evidence' and 'truths' that otherwise elude them. At the same time, the dazzling digital effects used to punctuate key moments in each episode inevitably reference scientific technologies and the knowledge about reality that these promise. The success of the CSIs in every episode is premised upon knowledge guaranteed by scientific inscriptions and is itself an inscription of ways of seeing human bodies and the social body, represented by police scientists working to ensure public safety – a healthy social body. And it is also about how bodies, individual and social, are constituted as information, made knowable and validated by scientific instruments and procedures used to produce evidence.

KEYWORDS *autopsy, crime drama, digital imaging, evidence, forensic science, spectacle, televisuality, visual culture*

> The living night is dissipated in the brightness of death.
> (Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, 1975[1963]: 146)

Newspaper stories, as well as anecdotal reports, tell us that a large number of aspiring police detectives in the United States have set their sights on careers in criminalistics, also known as crime scene investigation (Gross, 2002; personal communication with E. Cohen, Criminal Justice program faculty, Broward Community College, 2003; St John, 2003).[1] The reason for the spike in interest in this field is not surprising. According to all accounts it is attributable to the popularity of the TV series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, which first aired in autumn 2000 and has been ranked

at the top of the Nielsen ratings since the beginning of its third season. Recent figures indicate that over 26 million viewers in the US watch each new episode. However, my own interest in the show does not stem from its enormous popularity, although that is a phenomenon worth considering, but from research on what literary theorist and critic Mark Seltzer has called 'the spectacle of crime'. Seltzer (1992) employs this expression in his study of 19th-century realist literature. But I believe that this concept, as well as its connotations, can be usefully updated, amended and applied in a different media environment where televisual dramas take advantage of digital imaging techniques to produce gripping spectacles. *CSI*, in which dramatic developments frequently pause for dazzling displays of computer graphic virtuosity, offers plentiful examples of such applications. However, electronic media do not just play instrumental and performative roles in *CSI*. Scientific inscriptions also appear as important terms in the series' semiotic vocabulary, supplying the most reliable (and often incontrovertible) information used to identify and locate the felons who set the law enforcement apparatus in motion in every episode.

This article explores how the proliferation of digital imagery on television may – or may not – indicate significant shifts in visual culture, signaling the advent of a new way of seeing, a new visual culture. Surely the term 'new media', used to describe digital electronic entertainment of various kinds, holds out this promise. The proliferation of computerized devices used in the production, storage, retrieval and distribution of information and entertainment has generated qualitative transformations in cultural forms and institutions, as well as in economic and political processes. But undertaking this line of enquiry cannot ignore the lineage of current imaging techniques, which can be traced back to 19th-century mechanical and electrical systems such as photography and telegraphy.[2] The grandchildren of these systems can be found both behind the scenes and on screen in many recent TV crime dramas, perhaps most notably in *CSI*. Their status as performers in *and* producers of electronic, digital spectacles calls attention to *CSI*'s incessant referencing of scientific technologies and knowledge pertaining to human life. In short, the program offers weekly demonstrations of the benefits of modern science linked to efforts to ensure public security, as well as suggestions for how to bring this about.

Alongside the flux of visual imagery that harnesses the quest for scientific truths to scenes of very dramatic and always successful criminal detection in *CSI* there emerges a related and perhaps more significant feature of the series' departure from earlier (as well as many current) television police shows – the mobilization of a historically and culturally specific kind of subject. Victims and criminals alike are portrayed as transparent creatures whose every secret is revealed by means of resolute scrutiny. This aspect of *CSI* is not identical to what has become one of the most controversial effects of electronic digital media on social life: the

production, performance and inhabitation of 'virtual' identities and communities. Instead, the transparent self produced by *CSI* is neither 'virtual' nor 'real', nor can it be understood solely in terms of embodiment (or disembodiment). What is more intriguing is that the paradigmatic self proposed by *CSI* also entails the *disappearance* of the subject, a self rendered so transparent that it vanishes or remains perceptible only as the sum of inscriptions.[3]

Thus, this study of *CSI* proposes two analytic vectors. First, the program produces an echo chamber effect, where attention-grabbing digital video images are employed to engage viewers in mysteries best solved using hi-tech forensic investigation techniques. Second, the program's dramatic visualization of crime detection maps a social realm conducive to certain kinds of subjectivity that differ substantially from the coherent, sovereign self of modernity. The article will proceed from the first to the second of these concerns by moving through a set of thematic explorations. However, there are a number of points at which any hope for linear logic must be abandoned, since the various motifs are intricately interrelated.

Spectacle

To begin a critique of *CSI* with an emphasis on its visual qualities, its spectacular features, may seem to neglect a central concern of much television criticism: the narrative elements of dramatic fiction and the meanings that can be attributed to these. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that *CSI is* a cop show, even if the main characters are not police officers but the 'civilian' employees of a police department. Another, more significant, difference between the series and its TV crime show precursors is that the primary agents of law enforcement in *CSI* are not uniformed cops, plain clothes detectives or virtuoso private investigators. They are *scientists*. These protagonists care more about the application of scientific technologies to generate and organize knowledge than crime and punishment. The show's main character is Gil Grissom, a nerdy, middle-aged, white forensic scientist who is in charge of the crime laboratory. Although Grissom occupies the position of *éminence grise*, the show does not perpetuate traditional notions of science as an exclusive white or masculine preserve. With one exception, his four associates are younger, less experienced and somewhat less nerdy. Warrick Brown is a black man and Catherine Willows and Sara Sidle are white women; Nick Stokes is the only other white man in the group. A hipper young laboratory technician, Greg Sanders, assumes a key role as the operator of the laboratory's hi-tech equipment. The main set is the Las Vegas Police Department crime laboratory – not a squad room as in most police shows, but like a squad room it serves as the primary site where the regular characters interact, the space to which they return after venturing into the world (Sparks, 1992). (At a panel at the Museum of Television and Radio the series'

producers noted that their laboratory is better equipped that any real crime laboratory in the country; Museum of Television and Radio, 2001.)

These features of *CSI* suggest a need for critical approaches that differ substantially from the standard questions that have been asked of television programs dealing with crime. Crime drama has been a staple of television in the US since it became the country's most popular form of entertainment in the 1950s (the first major success of this kind was *Dragnet*), and criminologists, sociologists, social psychologists, TV critics and politicians have all scrutinized the knotty relationships between television's depictions of crime, the police, social behavior deemed criminal and attitudes toward public safety. Some critics are interested in the medium's effects on those prone to engage in illegal activities, a position that assumes the probity of police institutions and practices. This approach tries to determine to what degree TV shows (and other popular media) inspire or glamorize crime. Others are suspicious of television's reinforcement of a moral order that favors authoritarian social structures and justification of related methods of social control. Although the latter critical stance is shared by researchers using various methods and emphasizing different analytic elements, the interpretative strategies undertaken from this position all involve unmasking television's ideological complicity with state power (Buxton, 1990; Carlson, 1985; Donovan, 1998; Ericson, 1995; Scheingold, 1997; Sumser, 1996; Surette, 1992).[4] Despite the apparent opposition of the two schools, both study stories about crime and policing on TV to tease out their moral messages.

Compared to earlier television offerings, *CSI* and other recent shows inject a major new ingredient into this particular kind of program, treating crime dramas as occasions for audiences to engage with displays of power presented as technological mastery. In some cases, the police themselves wield the digital tools, such as the Compstat (computer statistics) system featured in *The District*, which allows a fictional Washington, DC police chief to illustrate deficiencies in crime prevention in order to embarrass underperformers in his department as well as to assist in catching crooks. Other shows such as *Law and Order* increasingly include scenes where a detective looks over the shoulder of a fingerprint analyst watching digitized records from the FBI's Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) database race by on a computer screen. They also consult regularly with medical examiners and ballistics specialists who hover over microscopes and recite the results of scientific tests. The protagonists in the newer program *Las Vegas* (which is not a proper cop show, but a first cousin featuring security officers at a fancy casino hotel) perform their duties in front of an impressive bank of surveillance monitors. But more than any of these shows, *CSI* relies on hi-tech gadgetry as instruments of discovery and discipline.

In addition to placing *CSI* in the context of contemporary TV crime drama, a critique of *CSI* must take into account what John Thornton

Caldwell (1995) calls 'televisuality'. According to Caldwell, the aesthetic priorities of television underwent a massive overhaul in the early 1980s, when dependence on sound as the organizing principle was replaced by an emphasis on visual elements. Competition for TV audiences in the US in an era when proliferating cable channels threatened to chip away at the dominance of the big three networks provoked the development of distinct styles that gave each prime-time program a signature 'look' that set it apart from its rivals. *CSI* is no exception. Its style is replete with high-gloss, color-saturated imagery that often flashes on the screen for brief moments, usually accompanied by fast-paced, driving music. The show's Las Vegas setting provides a rationale for lots of neon glitter. The CSI team forming the core of the show's cast works the night shift, which justifies the use of high-contrast lighting and lots of shadowy spaces to produce dramatic tension. In brief, *CSI* shares the ensemble acting, film-style lighting and camerawork, fragmented yet realist narrative and jazzy graphic construction of many contemporary series that appear on US television, with its own aesthetic flourishes intended to generate visual excitement. But *CSI* also displays other characteristics that are rarely seen in other cop shows. Crimes are almost always portrayed as flashbacks, often as imaginary reconstructions, hardly ever as prosaic realism, which continually disrupts the cause–effect logic that is common to visual narratives. At the same time, the series rarely treads upon the supernatural territory occupied by series such as *The X-Files*, *Profiler* or various Stephen King-inspired (or scripted) series. Several episodes have involved paranormal adepts who seem able to perform detective work without bothering with scientific instruments or methods. Still, these are rare, perhaps because emphasis on the uncanny would signal a retreat from the show's basic commitment to well-supported, objective, deductive reasoning.

However, as a spectacle, *CSI* demands a revision of Caldwell's concept of televisuality. In particular, he insists on the autonomy of visual elements, proposing that '[t]he practice of graphic performance tends . . . to resist analysis as content, since it comes across as an autonomous process based on the potentially endless permutation [of] style and form' (1995: 147). As a result, he plays down the social resonance of spectacle. In his study of realist fiction, Seltzer (1992) suggests a more productive approach. In his discussion of a 1893 novel by Stephen Crane, Seltzer remarks that violence is converted into spectacle through the intervention of the police, who are themselves turned into an entertaining spectacle. More than a century later, applications of digital imaging techniques in both law enforcement and television production have aligned televisual style with police practices. And computer science provides both with the tools of power. *CSI* exploits this technical affinity. This is not merely another example of the fluid interchange between digital formats, referred to as convergence in 'new media' studies. Rather, the incom-

mensurability of form and content that has long been an accepted principle for many cultural critics becomes untenable. On *CSI*, and arguably other programs too, televisual style reiterates and reinforces technologies of the social machine (Seltzer, 1992).

Photography

CSI has accomplished a rare feat for commercial television: bridging the divide between modern science (not science fiction) and entertainment. Although this may seem an odd coupling, the two cultural fields share one important attribute: both concentrate upon the production of new kinds of knowledge using new kinds of scientific apparatuses and the inscriptions these produce. Of course, empirical science from the 17th century onwards has been premised upon just such developments. And so, too, has plentiful entertainment. Enlightenment culture was the first to bring the two together. Barbara Maria Stafford notes that telescopes and microscopes were popular as home entertainment in 17th-century Europe:

> Until the middle of the nineteenth century, traveling exhibitionists set up raree shows stocked with monsters, magic lanterns and peep boxes. Perspective games such as concertina-folded views, anamorphoses, mirror metamorphoses and polyoptic pictures were both playful and scientific amusements. (1994: 366)

Still, skepticism regarding visual imagery produced with optical devices abounded, informed by fears that appearances would be mistaken for substance.

Another instance of images produced for scientific purposes but also consumed as amusement was X-ray photography, an accidental discovery made in 1895. These apparently non-intrusive vistas of the innards of living beings engendered what was known as 'X-ray mania', until their pathological properties became accepted as a matter of fact (Cartwright, 1995: 107). There were X-ray movies as well. Cinema in general could be described as the most famous example of popular enthusiasm for a new optical technology almost as soon as it made its public debut at the end of the 19th century. Concomitantly, the cinematic apparatus, as well as its progenitor, photography, was recognized and quickly integrated into biological research and medicine (Cartwright, 1995).

In sum, optical apparatuses, cameras and photographic media in particular, occupy a privileged place in the history of the relationship between science and popular culture. The reason is simple: a camera mechanically records an image by means of chemistry or, nowadays, electronics, free from human manipulation. The photographic image, if not intentionally distorted, is intended as a precise record of what is in front of the camera. In the laboratory, the camera has been employed by scientists as a

guarantee of objective observation and inscription of experimental phenomena, since a camera has no sentiments, soul, consciousness, politics or biases – or so commonsense wisdom tells us. Cameras in tandem with microscopes – a duet performed almost as soon as the daguerreotype process was made public in 1839 – epitomize the concept of depersonalized vision.

The intimate relationship between photographic imagery and scientific realism in the realm of policing was established on similar grounds. As early as the 1830s, photographic media provided police departments with an invaluable tool (Tagg, 1981). Alphonse Bertillon, chief of the Paris police at the end of the 19th century, was not the first but probably the most famous advocate of police photography for criminal identification. He augmented his system of criminal classification and identification, which consisted of anthropometric measurements of the bodies of criminal suspects, with what became known as 'mugshots' (Sekula, 1986). The information obtained was compared with a huge file comprising cards with the measurements and photos of previously detained criminal suspects, housed at the Paris Department of Judicial Identification. Significantly, Bertillon was among the first police officials to photograph crime scenes in murder cases, sometimes operating the camera himself (Parry, 2000).

The formation and proliferation of police departments in the 19th century came about because of the perceived need for increased knowledge concerning rapidly growing populations of modern cities. A related factor was the reconceptualization of crimes, previously regarded as actions per se but now understood as actions carried out by deviant *individuals* (Foucault, 1979[1975]). Mugshots codified the connection between particular people and criminal behavior and became a mainstay in the project of policing. And around the turn of the century, police photography added another rational system of identification to its repertoire: fingerprints, which until recently were recorded and archived as photographs (Cole, 2001). Not only is photography the medium used to preserve fingerprints; the two can be linked metaphorically. In William J. Mitchell's words, a photograph 'is like a direct physical imprint, like a fingerprint left at the scene of a crime or lipstick traces on your collar. A correspondence with reality is thus causally established' (2001: 24).

Therefore, it is not surprising that when the criminalists in *CSI* go to work at a crime scene they methodically take photographs, which presumably will be used when testifying as expert witnesses in court (although we hardly ever see this phase of the process, a point that will be explored later). In addition to portraying an actual police procedure, these scenes present a visual reiteration of the terms upon which the show is premised, reminding viewers that *visual* knowledge is at stake. Even when cameras are absent in the depiction of a particular investigation, every episode offers persistent references to the primacy of vision, most notably when

the crime scene investigators (CSIs) brandish what might be considered the program's trademark: sleek Mag-lite high-intensity flashlights. An almost predictable moment in every episode is a close-up of one of the CSIs delicately describing the area where the crime occurred with her or his flashlight, scrutinizing some minutia that will be plucked from the scene and sent to the laboratory for analysis.

Once in the crime laboratory, the opportunities for eye-catching images emphasizing knowledge gained through visual observation expand exponentially. The laboratory is also where the analogy between digital video effects and digital scientific equipment is most pronounced. The typical shots that accomplish this fill the screen with (supposedly) microscopic views, enlarged electronically so the scientists and the audience can examine, for example, a single carpet fiber, a particle of soil or a fragment of broken glass. Computer screens display data of all kinds. Specialized software simulates the process of facial reconstruction. Digital printouts of DNA analyses appear routinely, offering certain proof of guilt or innocence. Computer programs generate floor plans of entire crime scenes.

Curiously, the notorious potential for altering digital photographic imagery is never mentioned. Of course, tampering with photographs was hardly unknown before the introduction of digital cameras and scanners. Many still view digital photographs as ambiguous representations of reality, and there is little doubt that the mirror-of-nature quality of photography has been seriously undermined in recent years as visual culture becomes increasingly digitized. But to acknowledge this would create a contradiction between the certainties of science that television's CSIs depend upon to assert their authority, and the uncertainty produced by pictures of the world composed of something as imperceptible as electrons, organized by something as immaterial as binary code.

Vision

The collection of artefacts of crimes and their translation into evidence is the basic occupation depicted in *CSI*, which gives rise to myriad imaginative puzzles for the scientists to solve. The options seem limitless, ranging from the staples of forensic police work – blood analysis, microscopic examination of spent bullets, impressions of tire tracks and footwear, chemical analyses of paint chips, etc. – to the more esoteric – calculations of the life-cycles of insect larvae, for example. The variety of forensic techniques depicted in the series may attest to the inventiveness of *CSI* scriptwriters, but the series' standbys are fingerprint analyses and X-rays of DNA molecules. Fingerprint identification, which was accepted as legally admissible by a British judge in 1905, is in many respects the classic type of forensic science (Beavan, 2001; Cole, 2001). Surprisingly, a nationwide computerized fingerprint database was not developed in the

US until the early 1970s and even then, police departments in various cities and states installed incompatible systems which delayed the possibility of a fully integrated system until the end of the century (Cole, 2001). It is no accident that this achievement practically coincides with the debut of *CSI*, where an array of fingerprints flashing by as a computer performs a search for a match can be seen in just about every episode.

Such scenes not only portray computers augmenting the power of the police. They also imply a hierarchical human–machine dyad, with machines taking command. In actual AFIS searches computers produce only candidates for matching prints, from which a specialist selects the print that she or he deems identical to whatever was collected at the scene. Then the fingerprint expert must defend this decision in court and judges and juries sometimes disagree. In contrast, on *CSI* the machines do all the work and the matching process is represented as definitive. Likewise, DNA analysis is presented on the program as foolproof evidence of guilt (or innocence), ignoring successful challenges to the iron-clad veracity of this method of identification by defense attorneys, most famously in O.J. Simpson's trial for murder (Halfon, 1998; Jasanoff, 1998; Lynch, 1998). If *CSI*'s crime laboratory workers declare a match between two DNA samples, whoever is the source of the genetic material might as well forget about hiring a lawyer.

Computers running the AFIS and CODIS (Combined DNA Identification System) databases, along with all the other extremely complex and efficient equipment in *CSI*'s laboratory, play prominent roles that practically upstage the human technicians who push buttons and brandish documents containing the machines' output. In doing so, the series reiterates increasingly common analogies between computers and neurological processes found in many sectors of contemporary life. Mark Poster (1990: 148) traces this conflation to developments in computer science: '[T]he scientist projects intelligent subjectivity onto the computer and the computer then becomes the criterion by which to define intelligence, judge the scientist, outline the essence of humanity.' This spiral of substitutions and its effect on subjectivity accelerates as the social environment is increasingly visualized as a digital 'grab bag', as it is in *CSI*. The endeavor becomes an even more vertiginous exercise when the realism implicit in scenes of scientific discovery is delivered by means of elaborate, painstakingly crafted videographic effects.

It seems apt to ask at this point whether mastery of various digital imaging apparatuses on *CSI* and the potency of the inscriptions that they generate is indicative of a new visual culture which, as Bruno Latour (1986: 9) says, 'redefines both what it is to see and what there is to see'. He offers several criteria for the proliferation of new forms of inscription, which then inform new visual cultures. According to Latour, the move from instrumental inscription to conventional visual culture is accomplished when the former results in the domination of a given field,

as mechanized printing of maps and other geographical information did for navigation in early-modern Europe, enabling economic and political domination. Control of trade routes and colonization are but two examples of the effects of Europeans' development and utilization of printed documents that described the physical world and, as a result, such documents became authoritative representations of that world. Foremost among Latour's ingredients for a new visual culture are portability and speed – not, he insists, perception. 'The main problem to solve,' he contends, 'is that of *mobilization* . . . you have to invent objects which have the property of being *mobile* but also *immutable*, *presentable*, *readable* and *combinable* with one another' (1986: 7): five check-offs for digital images. Not only are visual displays – diagrams, photographs, graphs and so forth – used by scientists to *represent* data but these inscriptions also *constitute* data in the first place (Lynch, 1985: 44). Moreover, Latour maintains that what these inscriptions look like makes arguments about how the data should be interpreted (Latour, 1986: 3). It is the same on *CSI*. The visualization of social disorder as a series of problems best investigated *and* represented by the latest computer equipment conveys a way of seeing both crime and policing that valorizes the 'machine intelligence' that organizes and describes 'evidence'.

Evidence

The reliance on truths generated and represented by scientific inscriptions in *CSI* produces yet another significant innovation in TV crime drama: its disregard of psychological knowledge. None of the regular characters are endowed with much of what is called an inner life, nor do they exhibit extraordinary psychological awareness like the protagonists in many other TV series about crime detection. No attempt is made to provide them with so-called well-rounded personalities. They rarely lose their tempers or raise their voices or otherwise appear out of control; this is especially true of Grissom, the boss who sets the tone for his underlings. Plot twists involving protagonists' personal problems are rare. When one of them enquires about another's private life, the friendly gesture is usually brushed aside. Most tellingly, scant attention is paid to the main characters' sexual or romantic relationships, although there was some flirtation between Grissom and Sara in several episodes, but nothing beyond an exchange of meaningful looks.[5]

In the same vein, *CSI* plots do not revolve around efforts to understand the motives of those who commit crimes. Overall, there is remarkably little concern with why people kill but a great deal with how people die. Consider, for example, the infrequency of confession scenes in the series (although for the purposes of narrative coherence criminal characters do sometimes confess, but only if they are confronted with the CSIs' forensic data). In other police shows the confession occurs at the moment when the

puzzling elements of a particular crime are finally pieced together. Such an enunciation of truth often serves as the resolution of an episode – or at least as the moment of high drama where the lead interrogator gets to demonstrate his (less frequently her) superb understanding of what makes criminal minds tick. In addition to the narrative function of confessions – and arguably more importantly – these scenes produce an illusion of depth in an otherwise two-dimensional medium. As Peter Brooks (2000: 111) comments, 'the practice of confession creates the metaphors of innerness that it claims to explore . . . the very notion of inwardness is consubstantial with the requirement to explore and examine it'. However, on *CSI* the search for truth has been relocated, in concert with a more general cultural turn, from reading minds to reading bodies.

The moment when one of the CSIs informs a suspect that his or her confession is not necessary to establish guilt, which happens quite frequently, signals a revision of the traditional TV representation of the police as psychological experts. Laboratory science supersedes self-revelation and eliminates worries about human fallibility – deceit, inaccuracy or ignorance. Brooks interprets the probative power of confessions in law courts (as well as in other disciplinary contexts such as religion) as a 'generalized demand for transparency' (2000: 4). In *CSI* transparency is still in demand, but the conditions for producing it have changed. The impediments to transparency posed by human distortions, which will always plague confession, are overcome deftly by inanimate machinery capable of processing and analyzing information.

As we are reminded in just about every episode, the CSIs differ from other members of the police force not because they possess greater psychological insight, but because they are required to think scientifically. Over and over the CSIs repeat the mantra: 'The evidence doesn't lie.' When one of them loses sight of this maxim, as when Warrick's inaccurate identification of a murderer leads to the downfall of a friend whose daughter was the murder victim, the error seems to bring the vengeance of Francis Bacon down on the lapsed scientist's head. Gaffs by other CSIs have been less serious, but all become object lessons – for the heedless, too emotionally engaged characters and also for viewers – on the importance of abjuring any personal interest while interpreting evidence.

However, what the show fails to acknowledge is that data – which on the program describes all of the material collected as 'evidence' – is not the same as evidence as understood by scientists. The CSIs' routine statements about the need for rigorous adherence to scientific practices seems to promise a new approach to justice, in which outlaws are convicted well before they appear before a judge or a jury is impaneled, well before the evidence is presented in court to be tested by the defense attorney's cross-examination, well before a jury decides whether the evidence presented by the prosecution is indeed credible and relevant and therefore qualifies as evidence at all. Klaus Amann and Karin Knorr Cetina (1990: 88) make

this distinction very clearly: '[D]ata become evidence only after they have undergone elaborate processes of selection and transformation', which is accomplished by discussions among researchers about what inscriptions of data represent. In scientific practice, the ideal sequence goes like this: data collection–inscription–evidence–truth. In legal contexts, inscriptions qualify as evidence only when their validity is considered and accepted by the court.

But on *CSI* no disputes over what inscriptions mean seem to trouble the course of justice. Indeed, the program implies that judgments of guilt or innocence based on scientific findings will be more even-handed and impartial than those meted out by humans. Culpability is determined in the laboratory, *proven* by its instruments. Accused lawbreakers are indicted and found guilty by scientists before they even get to court. The absence of adjudication by juries and judges is unusual for a crime show and suggests that *CSI* is not really about crime and punishment (although it may suggest a chilling futuristic fantasy where punishment is meted out without due process). Nor is it about eliciting truth by means of a confession. Rather, the locus of truth in *CSI* resides in expert applications of scientific technologies that organize and produce inscriptions, without troubling with problems of interpretation. What allows *CSI* to skip the step of interpretation – to present inscriptions, which on television are *always* presented as photographic images, as irrefutable proof – is a kind of magical property of photography: a visualization technology associated with the idea of unmediated truth, 'not "copies of nature" but portions of nature herself', to quote Samuel Morse, America's first daguerreotypist and telegraph inventor (quoted in Miller, 1998: 5). But when photographic media are conscripted for entertainment, the hedonistic pleasures associated with popular culture threaten to override impersonal objectivity. This is a problem that the producers of *CSI* seem to have taken to heart, counteracting the sensuality of visually compelling digital effects with images that evoke the somber realness of human flesh – *dead*, weighty, inert human flesh.

Autopsy

So far, *CSI* has avoided the charge of excessive violence often leveled at other crime shows. Instead, it serves up blood and guts using such a heavy dose of aestheticization that any accusation of authentic brutality would be difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, the most gruesome autopsy scene in almost every episode (sometimes there is more than one) is concocted as another kind of frightful spectacle. Such scenes of methodical disembowelment, glossed by the narration of the resident pathologist, appear near the beginning of just about every episode and provide the foundation for whatever the team will do for the rest of the hour. (In contrast, the first and only 'cop-science' series on American TV before *CSI*, *Quincey, M.E.*

(1976–83), never showed the gory labor performed by the eponymous hero.) What can be seen as the 'money shot' in *CSI* occurs when, during the autopsy, the camera appears to penetrate a wound or orifice and produce gushing blood, exploding organs or distressed viscera, simulating the damage inflicted by the fatal weapon or the disintegration of tissue resulting from some sort of toxic substance.

The virtuoso display of digital videographics used in these close-up zooms boring into human bodies, recall the pictures produced by medical endoscopy. But despite their dependence on state-of-the-art special effects – hybrid images made up of photographs and films of props, virtual 3D models, digital 3D animation and photographic texture mapping – these scenes faithfully recapitulate the authority of the medical gaze – that is, knowledge about human life gained through visual perception that date back several centuries. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1975[1963]) describes the dissection of corpses that became commonplace in European hospitals and medical schools during the mid-18th century. He maintains that these autopsies provided epistemological support for the rationalization of knowledge about disease and health. Foucault's *précis* of the lessons learned from autopsies is: 'That which hides and envelops, the curtain of night over truth, is, paradoxically, life; and death, on the contrary, opens up to the light of day the black coffer of the body' (1975[1963]: 166).

Numerous scholars have elaborated the history of the diffusion of insights gained through applications of the medical gaze that link examination of the insides of human bodies to knowledge. For example, Ludmilla Jordanova (1980: 57) informs us that 'when Jules Michelet wished to comprehend the condition of women in mid-nineteenth-century France, his first port of call was the dissecting room and his reading was anatomy texts'. Mary Poovey (1995) extends the analysis to analogies of social organization and the human body in mid-19th-century British culture, including examples from early sociological studies of urban environments that combined eyewitness accounts with statistical data to produce images of truth akin to what she calls 'anatomical realism' (1995: 74). The analytic techniques used to achieve verisimilitude in these studies, she contends, resembled the realism attempted in pedagogical drawings and three-dimensional models of human anatomy.

Literary texts written during a slightly later period demonstrate what Seltzer (1992: 95) describes as realist insistence on a compulsory and compulsive visibility', which he relates to '[t]he frequent association of later nineteenth-century realism with a sort of dissection, vivisection, or surgical opening of the body'. In addition to work by British and American novelists Seltzer considers publications by Jacob Riis, whose photographic survey of New York City slums is often credited as the founding text of social documentary photography. Riis's reformist texts, like Poovey's examples, include statistics in order to infuse his study with scientific

realism alongside the pictorial realism of photography. Returning to the medical arena at the end of the 19th century, Norman Jewson (1976: 231) identifies a transition from what he calls 'Hospital Medicine', which privileged 'anatomical pathology' to 'Laboratory Medicine', where biologists and chemists reigned. The effect of this phase was, as the title of Jewson's article on the topic asserts, 'the disappearance of the sick man' – which could be construed as the disappearance of the human subject.

Such excursions into sociocultural history demonstrate the legacy of the relationship between anatomical imagery and both social science and popular media. Now, however, the translation of visual images into computer code revs up television's mobilized gaze of modernity – as analyzed by Raymond Williams (1975) and Margaret Morse (1998) – allowing the audience to glide seamlessly between the outside and inside of bodies in feats of micro-voyeurism. This triumph of videographic image-making brings to mind non-invasive medical technologies like the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) used to render internal bodily tissues transparent. Although *CSI* evokes the anatomical textbook of the 18th century and the disappearing sick man of the 19th, the program distances the production of knowledge about life even further from living bodies. Each dead body is represented as a repository of encoded information, not unlike data stored on digital media. The CSIs frequently talk about their responsibility to 'speak for the dead', a cliché heard often on television crime shows these days that seems to honor the particular lives of those who have been killed. But what the CSIs say on their behalf tells little about specific individuals beyond the particular circumstances of their deaths. Doctors once sought new knowledge about disease, and therefore health, in anatomized, anonymous cadavers. *CSI* extends and resituates the knowledge provided by the performance of autopsies as diagnoses of social pathology. But in order to do this the social body must be visualized, constituted as information and made knowable by employing scientific instruments and procedures. Enter, once again, the police wielding gear devised to visualize, and generate knowledge about, the social landscape and those who inhabit it.

Crime

One of *CSI*'s most curious features is its ambivalent appeal to realism. The series' episodes are narrative dramas with characters who resemble, and are sometimes modeled on, actual forensic scientists; they are also fictions with plots sometimes borrowed from actual cases (Giatto et al., 2002). But the aesthetic style of the program never tries to mimic documentary realism or employ a formal approach akin to the deadpan, no-frills *Dragnet* of the 1950s. To state the obvious, the way in which the *CSI* characters run exemplary investigations, solve all puzzles and always locate and indict the culprits appears far removed from messy, often incon-

clusive quotidian police work (or laboratory science). Still, in addition to the realist conventions used to present convincing representations of places, people and events, *CSI* benefits from a 'reality effect' in so far as it reiterates recent trends in law enforcement policy that treat crime as a feature of everyday social commerce. According to this approach, crime is neither extraordinary nor particularly remarkable. Therefore, it is best analyzed in terms of 'risks and rewards, rationality, choice, probability, targeting and the demand for supply of opportunities' (Garland, 1997: 186). Similarly, the miscreant is regarded as a rational economic actor who seizes self-serving opportunities that come his or her way. As a result, the criminal's aura of monstrosity becomes difficult to sustain.

In almost every instance, *CSI*'s wrongdoers fit this description. Murderers (the category to which most of the program's felons belong) take advantage of situations but remain invisible to the police as criminals because of their apparent normalcy. Even more difficult to spot are the accidental killers, who are more prosaic characters than the opportunists. Similarly, crimes and their solutions on *CSI* sidestep moral categorization – right or wrong – and are evaluated instead in terms of truth and falsehood. Without invoking the authority of personal or collective values, crimes are deciphered through applications of objective scientific standards. Ultimately, however, *CSI does* involve morality, but not a system concerned with the distinctions between good and bad individuals. The latter, more familiar framework informs narratives where evil, dangerous villains are captured, indicted and punished. In *CSI* morality operates as an expression of scientific truth, equated with the generalized *social* good.

When the forensic scientists in *CSI* use information-processing, image-producing apparatuses, they delve into the nooks and crannies of the social fabric, in many instances without leaving the laboratory. In order to apprehend those who threaten social wellbeing, they capture and study physical remnants – a strand of hair, a toenail clipping, a fleck of dandruff, a drop of saliva or blood, dirt adhering to soles of shoes, insects feasting on a corpse and so on. In order to produce 'evidence' they transform all sorts of objects, including bodies in the morgue, into digital inscriptions. Scenes showing the CSIs at work searching a database, peering through an electron microscope, or skillfully operating all sorts of elaborate equipment, constitute arguments for the advantages of digital computing and communication systems as the most efficient, most effective surrogate police. And *CSI* affirms this achievement in its constant reminders of the electronic underpinnings of the program's existence. Indeed, *CSI* goes to great lengths to reveal the means of production and a curious kind of self-referentiality is built into the series. The discovery of truth – what *really* happened – in any *CSI* episode requires the careful reading of inscriptions, both by the fictional investigators and the audience. At the same time, the program's televisual style inscribes a particular way of seeing. Whenever a

character offers a theory or subjective account of a crime, the voiceover is illustrated by stylized, obviously manipulated images. Such scenes underscore the concept of crime-solving as a visual enterprise. But because they also always turn out to be eroneous, these scenes imply that truth is detected best by machines, not mere humans.

A spectator cannot help but gawk. But she may also want to keep in mind that what she sees is an optical game, an entertaining but hardly innocent vision of computer code configured as knowledge, a power play that commends digital technology for its ability to make lives – individual and collective – transparent. This is a world where electronic mastery provides solutions to all mysteries, full disclosure of all secrets, discovery of all truths. Even the tiniest, mundane residues of human life can incriminate. But rather than leading inevitably to paranoia or despondency, *CSI*'s televisual spectacle of crime also calls attention to the imaginary aspects of digital media, which consistently frustrate ambitions for incontestable knowledge. Significantly this goal, shared by Grissom and company, will always remain beyond reach.

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Notes

1. Gross's article appeared in the *New York Times*'s Sunday 'Style' section and was subtitled, 'Thanks to "CSI" Sleuthing Appeals to the Young and Tech-Savvy'.
2. Or much further, if one considers apparatuses used as aids for inscribing realistic images, such as the camera obsura; some credit Aristotle with the first recorded reference to this device.
3. The metaphor of the transparent subject becomes explicit in another successful Jerry Bruckheimer production for CBS, *Without a Trace*. The initial sequence of each episode shows the last known movements of the character whose disappearance occupies the show's FBI team responsible for locating missing persons. Just before the opening credits roll, the week's object of inquiry appears to evaporate while other aspects of the scene remain unchanged.
4. For Carlson, Ericson and Scheingold, the key question involves disparities between actual crime and arrest rates and how these are distorted in television crime fiction. A good example of genre criticism with an emphasis on ideology is Buxton. Surette and Sumser concentrate on analyses of stereotypes as indicators of ideological effects. Donovan also

makes ideology the central issue in her critique of television's representation of crime and justice, although her primary interest is 'reality TV' shows such as *Cops*, where stereotypes are less an issue than the moral implications of relationships between cops and criminals.

5. At least this is as far the attraction had progressed as of the time of writing (summer 2004). Whether or not more intimate involvement between the characters will ensue cannot be predicted, since it is always wise to resist the temptation to speculate about future directions taken by any TV series until it has run its course.

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